

August 13, 2018

Allie Stickney  
Chair, Board of Trustees  
University of Vermont Medical Center

Dear Ms. Stickney:

I write to urge the UVM-MC Board of Trustees to take a more active role in the contract negotiations between management and the nurses' union. I am not suggesting the Board become a formal party to the negotiations, but I strongly believe the Board has an important role to play directing the hospital's management to reach a fair contract with the nurses' union.

I was quite disappointed in your recent letter to AFT President Deb Snell in which you said the Board's "responsibility and obligation is to management." That is a very narrow and, I believe, inaccurate view of the Board's role. The primary responsibility and obligation of any non-profit board is *not* to management, but to the organization, and that includes providing oversight and guidance on issues related to the organization's workforce.

While it is clear you are hearing the perspectives of the hospital administration, I understand the Board has refused to sit down with the nurses to hear and discuss *their* views. Rather, as I understand it, the nurses were allowed to speak for just seven and a half minutes at a Board meeting, during a comment period reserved for the general public. Personally, I think that is very disrespectful to the nurses who give so much to the hospital and to the patients they care for.

As you know, no hospital can operate effectively without a strong and highly motivated nursing workforce. Yet, UVM-MC – the largest and most important component of Vermont's healthcare delivery system – is facing a serious nursing crisis. The hospital has a high nurse turnover rate and more than 170 vacancies, as nurses leave for higher paying jobs elsewhere. I am deeply concerned that instead of increasing pay to help recruit and retain nurses, UVM-MC has reportedly spent \$21 million over the past three years on expensive travel nurses to fill in the gaps. All of this has driven nurse morale to an all-time low, and I very much fear it may be affecting the quality of patient care as well.

Community confidence in the hospital is also waning. As a member of the community yourself, I am sure you are aware that many Vermonters, including many physicians who work at the hospital, are very sympathetic to the nurses' requests. For most people, pay equity with nurses in Plattsburgh – where the cost of living is significantly less than Burlington – is a very reasonable goal. Moreover, the nurses' situation widely resonates, I think, because so many people have firsthand experience with hospital nurses who deliver high quality and compassionate care. In fact, for most people, the nurses *are* the hospital. They are also our neighbors, friends and family. Vermonters want to see them paid fairly and treated with the respect and dignity they deserve.

Lastly, I honestly do not understand the logic of deferring to management to solve this crisis, when management is responsible for creating the crisis in the first place. In fact, not that long ago and during a very different crisis, the board's lack of oversight did not end well for the hospital, the board, or for hospital administrators.

The Board of Trustees' role must be more than, as you wrote to Ms. Snell, "helping with the healing...after the contract negotiations are completed." Instead, the Board can and must become actively involved, right now, in helping resolve this crisis and making sure that patients at the hospital receive the high quality care they deserve. That is why I respectfully urge the Board to meet with the nurses, hear their concerns and direct the administration to negotiate a fair contract. Just listening to and accepting the views of the administration is not good enough.

If I can be of any help resolving this impasse, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,



BERNARD SANDERS  
UNITED STATES SENATOR